

The Wrath and Impartial Judgment of God

Gentiles in Pauline Perspective

The wrath of God is the judgement under which we stand in so far as we do not love the Judge; it is the “No” which meets us when we do not affirm it. . . . The whole world is the footprint of God; yes, but, in so far as we choose scandal rather than faith, the footprint in the vast riddle of the world is the footprint of His wrath. The wrath of God is to unbelief the discovery of His righteousness, for God is not mocked. The wrath of God is the righteousness of God—apart from and without Christ.¹

Karl Barth’s massively influential commentary on Romans provides a breathtaking theological exposition of the text of Paul’s longest epistle. The First World War had placed an undeniable question mark against the very foundation of Western theology in the traditions of the Enlightenment. In the aftermath of the War, Barth’s commentary blazed a new trail and read Romans with eyes firmly focused on Paul’s gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Nevertheless, Barth’s theological reading of Romans suffers from certain exegetical shortcomings, not least of which is his too-eager universalization of Paul’s words. Barth uses first-person plural pronouns, referring to “the judgement under which *we* stand in so far as *we* do not love the Judge.” Romans 1 convicts Barth and confirms him in his conviction—correct as far as it goes—“that we are sinners, and

1. Barth, *Romans*, 42, 43.

that we must die.”² As Barth navigates Paul’s sudden turn from the revelation of the righteousness of God in the gospel (Rom 1:17) to the revelation of the wrath of God “against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (v. 18), he writes: “These are the characteristic features of *our* relation to God, as it takes shape on this side [*sic*; of] resurrection. *Our relation to God is ungodly*.”³ When Barth reads Rom 1:18–32, he finds Paul addressing him directly! However, in a letter replete with first- and second-person pronouns, we should note that Paul only uses third-person pronouns in this section. Paul is not writing about “us” or even “you”; he is writing about “them.”⁴

But First, the Wrath of God (Rom 1:18–32)

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth, ¹⁹ because the knowledge of God is evident among them (for God made it evident to them). ²⁰ For ever since the creation of the world his invisible qualities are perceived through created things; they are clearly discerned—whether his eternal power or also his deity—so that they might be without excuse, ²¹ because although they knew God they did not glorify him as God or give thanks, but they were rendered foolish in their thoughts and their senseless heart was darkened. ²² Although they claimed to be wise they were made foolish, ²³ and they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of a corruptible mortal or bird or four-footed creature or reptile.

²⁴ God, therefore, by means of the lusts of their hearts, handed them over to uncleanness, in order to dishonor their bodies among themselves. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and they worshipped and gave priestly service to the creation rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. ²⁶ For this reason, God handed them over to dishonorable passions, since their females exchanged the natural function for that which is contrary to nature, ²⁷ just as the males, also, abandoned the natural relation with a female. They were inflamed by their longing for one another, males committing this shameless deed with [other] males, so they also received the consequence that was required for their mutual deception.

²⁸ And just as they did not approve to have God in knowledge, God handed them over to a worthless mind, to do things that are not proper, ²⁹ since they are filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greediness,

2. Ibid., 43.

3. Ibid., 44; my emphases.

4. For an excellent discussion of this very issue, see Garroway, *Gentile-Jews*, 86–89.

and malice; they are full of envy, murder, strife, treachery, malevolence. They are gossipers,³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boasters, contrivers of evil deeds, disobedient to their parents,³¹ senseless, faithless, heartless, merciless.³³ Although they knew the righteous requirement of God—that those who practice such things are worthy of death—they not only practice such things but also approve of those who do them.

“But the righteous one will live by faith.” Habakkuk 2:4, along with the rest of Rom 1:14–17, is somehow related to the stark description of the ungodliness and unrighteousness that immediately follows in 1:18–32. Again we have the Greek conjunction *gar* (“for, because”), which “introduces the reason for a statement, which usually precedes.”⁵ Given the connection between vv. 14–17 and 18–32, the change in tone should surprise us. The gospel is the power of God for salvation, because in it the righteousness of God is revealed, along with the life of faith. And what comes next in Paul’s mind? “For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (1:18).⁶ Ekkehard Stegemann helpfully explains the movement from Rom 1:14–17 to vv. 18–32:

The key theme of Romans is not only the gospel and God’s power of salvation mediated by the revelation or appearance of God’s *dikaiosynē* [“righteousness”], which makes faithful believers righteous. The revelation of God’s wrath as soon coming into force is also part of it. There is, so to speak, a *dysangelion* [“anti-gospel”], too.⁷

The question, however, remains: why does Paul follow up on the exuberant confidence of Rom 1:14–17 with the stark depravity of vv. 18–32?

Romans 1:18–32 introduces the problem for which the gospel provides the solution. That is, the righteousness of God is being revealed with

5. LSJ, s.v. (cited above); see also Jewett, *Romans*, 151.

6. The present-tense verb, *apokalyptetai* (“is being revealed”) may convey future-oriented connotations (i.e., “will so certainly be revealed in the future that we speak of it as a certainty in the present”); however, as Jewett rightly notes, “[s]ince ‘wrath’ is an expression of Paul’s gospel, described in 1:16 with the identical present passive verb, *apokalyptetai*, the present progressive translation ‘is being revealed’ is appropriate for both” (“Anthropological Implications,” 26).

7. Stegemann, “Coexistence and Transformation,” 9.

power,⁸ in contrast with the revelation of his wrath against gentile idolatry. In other words, Paul contrasts the life of faith (v. 17) with the life of unrighteousness that suppresses the truth [of God]. Among the gentiles to whom Paul proclaims the gospel, sin, wickedness, unrighteousness, and ungodliness result from their failure to distinguish God, as Creator, from creation, the works of his hands.⁹ This is not a new state of affairs; it has characterized gentile society for as long as they have exchanged the worship of the Creator God for worship of hand-made idols.¹⁰ In light of the gentiles' misdirected worship, the world is less than the "good" God repeatedly declared over creation in Genesis 1. The gospel of God (Rom 1:1) reveals God's plan to rectify precisely this situation.

The beginning of Paul's discussion of the wrath of God (1:18–23) employs standard Jewish rhetoric against gentile idolatry, which strongly suggests that Paul's critique aims at gentiles and not Jews. Certainly the opening shot of Paul's harangue has universalistic possibilities. When he declares, "For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of humans" (1:18), the reference to "humans" (*anthrōpōn*) easily gives the impression that Paul has all humanity in view. And how does Paul describe or qualify the *anthrōpōn*—the "humans"—he has in mind? They "suppress the truth . . . by their unrighteousness" (v. 18). It takes little imagination to apply this general description at the feet of the human race *in toto*, to read Paul the way we read the psalmist: "there is none righteous, not even one" (Ps 14:1; see Rom 3:10). We have already seen Karl Barth offer this exact reading of Romans.¹¹

A careful reading of the text, however, reveals that Paul does not apply his comments either to himself or to his gentile readers. The knowledge of God is evident "among *them*," for God has revealed it "to *them*" (v. 19). Therefore, "*they* are without excuse" (v. 20), for "*they* neither glorified God nor gave thanks" (v. 21). "*They* were rendered foolish" (v. 22), and "*they*

8. Remember the reference to *dynamis theou* ("the power of God") in Rom 1:16.

9. We are emphasizing the point here, in contrast to other prominent commentators on Romans, that Rom 1:18–32 characterizes the "ungodliness and unrighteousness" of gentile idolatry and not "the human plight" (*pace* James D. G. Dunn, "Adam and Christ," 127).

10. *Pace* Robert Jewett, who interprets *gar* at the start of Rom 1:18 as an indication that "divine wrath is "in some sense at least, a new or newly revealed phenomenon and this implies that it is in some way related to the gospel" ("Anthropological Implications," 25; emphasis added; quoting Finamore, "Wrath," 140).

11. More recently, Victor Paul Furnish discusses Rom 1:18–3:20 under the heading, "Humanity's Plight" ("Living to God," 188). James Dunn uses the same phrase ("Adam and Christ," 127).

exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of the image of the corruptible: a human, or birds, or quadrupeds, or reptiles" (v. 23). And so on. Though we could read certain verses as general and universal condemnations of human depravity, especially vv. 18–22, this reading falters completely beginning at v. 23. Paul has something very specific in mind: not "the ongoing human effort to suppress the truth about their evil inclinations" but rather the worship of graven images patterned after mortal creatures.¹²

We need to resist the temptation to see Paul's critique as a general condemnation of gentile religiosity as a whole, as if all gentiles enthusiastically worshiped hand-made gods and only the Jews rejected idols as the works of human craftsmen.¹³ The criticism of idol-worship, though nearly universal among the Jews, "is also found among Graeco-Roman intellectuals, who ridiculed idol-worship as vulgar superstition (e.g., Heraclitus, Cicero, Plutarch, and Lucian)."¹⁴ We will see soon enough that Paul fits comfortably within the Jewish tradition of idol-critique. But first we should appreciate that Paul aims his critique not against gentiles *tout court* but against a specific and particular phenomenon among the gentiles. Paul tilts against the basest of the most debased aspects of gentile culture, aspects that other gentiles also critiqued, as we will see in Romans 2. More traditional readings construe Rom 1:18–3:20 as "the story of a world gone wrong," with 1:18–32 conveying "special emphasis . . . on Gentile sinfulness, probably in order to stress the universal condition of human bondage to Sin and Death."¹⁵ But why should "Gentile sinfulness" equate—let alone "stress"—"the universal condition of human bondage"? Instead, we would *expect* that a Jew (such as Paul was) would emphasize gentile sinfulness in order to throw Israel's election and status as the

12. Pace Jewett, "Anthropological Implications," 27. Dunn reads Rom 1:18–32 as an allusion to "the failure of Adam and Eve to obey the explicit command of God." He has mischaracterized the target of Paul's condemnation. Paul is not critiquing some general, vague notion of "fail[ure] to give God the glory and thanks due to him"; rather, he chastises the gentiles' idolatrous worship of created, corruptible images in lieu of the Creator God (*pace* Dunn, "Adam and Christ," 127–29; pp. 128 and 127 quoted).

13. Pace Schreiner, who speaks too universally of "Gentiles who have received a revelation of God through the created order [and] suppress and distort the revelation given to them" ("Justification," 138). Paul never suggests he is describing all gentiles in Romans 1. He does use *pas* ("all") twice in Rom 1:18–32, both times in reference to the vices that merit God's wrath ("all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of humans" [v. 18]; "all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, and malice" [v. 29]).

14. See Goodwin, *Paul*, 81 n.53, and the literature cited there.

15. Grieb, *Story*, 25–26.

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people of God into sharper relief! Moreover, if gentiles also recognized Israel's Torah as a means to overcome weakness and their passions (see our discussion of Romans 6–7, below), then nothing about Paul's anti-idol harangue in Romans 1 suggests "the universal condition of human bondage."

Paul argues that gentiles, who did not have the benefit of the Law, still perceived in God's creation the truth of the Creator.¹⁶ Jewish tradition already critiqued both pagan idolatry and Jews who succumbed to the influence of pagan idolatry. For example, the deuterocanonical Wisdom of Solomon condemns both idols and those who make them: "But the idol made with hands [*to cheiropoiēton*], it is even more accursed—both it and the one who made it—first because he made it, and second because, although it was corruptible [*phtharton*; see Rom 1:23], it was called a god" (Wis 14:8). Similarly, Isaiah receives a vision in which the Lord, seated upon a cloud, comes to Egypt. "The Egyptian idols made with hands [*cheiropoiēta Aigyptou*] will be shaken from his face, and their hearts shall wither within them" (Isa 19:1 LXX). Both the Egyptians and their hand-made idols quake before the presence of YHWH.

We could mention other striking examples of Jewish polemic against idol-worship. The clearest of them, however, comes from one of the deuterocanonical additions to Daniel, *Bel and the Dragon*, which ridicules gentile idolatry. Devotees of the idol Bel claimed the god consumed a daily diet of twelve measures of flour, forty sheep, and six measures of wine. Moreover, the Persian king, Cyrus, worshipped Bel daily. Daniel, the most esteemed of the king's friends, worshipped his own God. This puts Daniel in considerable danger, but his persistent faithfulness to Israel's God and his refusal to honor pagan gods ends up saving him and putting the Babylonian priests of Bel to shame.

In the narrative of *Bel and the Dragon*, both Daniel and the Babylonian priests are known quantities: Daniel will remain steadfastly faithful to Israel's God, and the priests of Bel will persist in idol-worship. The unknown variable, however, is Cyrus, a pagan who is genuinely open

16. Contemporary readers, mostly Christian and, therefore, mostly gentiles, may not appreciate the benefit and advantage Paul sees in having Torah. As Christians we affirm that Torah is the word (or Word) of God, but we nevertheless see it in third place, like God's revelatory step-child (compared to Jesus, God's one and only, beloved son). Paul never denigrates Torah in this way, though we will encounter a couple of texts later in Romans in which Christian exegetical tradition has attributed such a view to Paul. For Paul, however, Torah was and remained the word (or Word) of God.

(according to the narrative) to worshipping the true God of Israel.¹⁷ Bel and the Dragon narrates the following exchange: “The king asked him, ‘Why don’t you worship Bel?’ And [Daniel] replied, ‘Because I do not worship idols made by hands [*eidōla cheiropoiēta*]; instead [I worship] the living God who created heaven and earth and who holds dominion over all flesh” (Bel 1:5 [Θ]).¹⁸

Paul stands squarely in this Jewish tradition of critiquing gentile idol-worship. God through his creation was revealing himself—“his eternal power or also his deity” (Rom 1:20)—to all flesh. Gentiles, however, became enamored with the works of his hands and neglected the one whose hands made all things. Whereas God created humanity in his image and directed his image to worship him, humans—not all of them, but many of them—created gods in their image and served the works of their hands. Paul is relentless in his critique. Even though the gentiles “knew God, they did not glorify him as God or give thanks” (1:21); as a result, they were made senseless, futile, moronic. Their futility is on display in multiple venues, from their worship of corruptible images of humans, birds, quadrupeds, and reptiles, on the one hand, to their unnatural and aberrant sexual practices. The chapter ends with a scathing and extensive vice list (1:29–31) that leaves no question as to the revealed wrath of Israel’s God. The gentiles knew God’s standard of judgment: “those who practice such things are worthy of death” (Rom 1:32). Their wickedness, however, extended not only to doing such things but also approving of others who did them. They not only failed to imitate (= obey) the good God who created all things, but they also judged God unworthy of imitation (= obedience). For all these reasons, then, “the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven” (Rom 1:18).

Paul will shortly turn to address a gentile persona more characteristic of his implied readers. But for now, in Rom 1:18–32, we should take seriously the character of Paul’s rhetoric as a discussion *with* one party (gentile Christians in Rome; see Rom 1:7, 13–15) *about* another party (debauched, idol-worshipping gentiles). If anything, rather than the stark condemnation of humanity as a whole, such as Barth reads into the letter, we should

17. The Persian [= gentile] Cyrus already holds an honored place in biblical tradition; the Lord even calls him “Cyrus, my anointed one” [*tō christō mou*; Isa 45:1 LXX]!

18. The Old Greek version of Bel and the Dragon differs significantly here from Theodotion: “The king said to Daniel, ‘Why don’t you worship Bel?’ And Daniel replied to the king, ‘I worship nothing except the Lord God who created heaven and earth and who holds dominion over all flesh’” (Bel 1:5 [OG]). In both, however, the distinction between Creator and creature is central to the text’s critique of idol-worship.

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probably imagine Paul's audience nodding in agreement along with him, scandalized at the depths to which "some people" will go and confident that Paul's harangue is neither intended for nor applies to them.

You, Like Them, are without Excuse (Rom 2:1–16)

¹ Therefore, you are without excuse, all of you who judge, for you condemn yourself by that for which you judge another because you who judge do the very same things. ² But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against all those who do such things. ³ But do you think in this way—you who judge those who do such things but also do them—that you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴ Or do you despise the riches of his kindness, his forbearance, and his patience, being ignorant that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? ⁵ But, in accordance with your obstinacy and unrepentant heart, you are storing up for yourself wrath on the day of wrath and the revelation of the righteous judgment of God, ⁶ who repays each person according to their deeds: ⁷ To those who persistently seek the glory and honor and immortality of a good deed, eternal life. ⁸ To those who disobey the truth out of selfish ambition and instead obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. ⁹ Affliction and distress [shall fall] upon every human soul who practices evil, the Jew first as well as the Greek; ¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace for everyone who practices good, for the Jew first as well as for the Greek.

¹¹ For there is no favoritism with God. ¹² For all who have sinned in a lawless manner, shall perish in a manner befitting lawlessness. All who have sinned while living within Torah, shall have their case judged by Torah. ¹³ For the hearers of Torah are not right with God; instead, those who keep Torah will be justified. ¹⁴ For whenever gentiles, who by nature do not have Torah, do the things of Torah, they—although they do not have Torah—are Torah for themselves. ¹⁵ They demonstrate the work of Torah written on their hearts, their conscience testifying on their behalf—even as their thoughts are divided, alternatively accusing and then defending them— ¹⁶ on the day when God judges humanity's secrets, according to my gospel, through Christ Jesus.

One of the biggest obstacles facing Western readers of Romans 2 might be that the word "pagan" means, among other things, "immoral." We often think of polytheists as godless hedonists who were only interested in life's pleasures: food, drink, sex. Or we think of them as violent barbarians, like Klingons, who would just as quickly knife you in the back as give you the

time of day. Paul's description of gentile godlessness in Rom 1:18–32 easily fits into this understanding.

When we get to Romans 2, we often experience difficulty imagining that Paul still has gentile pagans in view.¹⁹ In Romans 1, Paul focuses on gentiles who forsake the Creator to worship images of created things, and, as a result, plunge into godless immorality. In Romans 2, Paul turns his attention to a class of individual who, like him, condemns the very people he described in 1:18–32.²⁰ We took special note of Paul's third-person rhetoric in Rom 1:18–32, but his rhetoric changes suddenly and dramatically in Rom 2:1. Now, Paul emphatically and directly addresses his audience, whether his actual audience—the readers of Romans—or an imagined audience, as we will suggest. If Paul's description of immoral masses in Romans 1 strikes us as so obviously referring to pagan gentiles, the hypocritical self-righteous moralist of Romans 2 has an equally obvious identity: the Jew, and especially the Pharisee.

James Dunn argues that Rom 2:1–16 presents a spiral that “consists of the increasing specificity of the Jewish identity of the viewpoint rebutted.”²¹ Dunn reads the entire section in terms of general Jewish ideas (e.g., election): “The underlying thrust of 2:1–11 now becomes explicit: the target is Jewish presumption of priority of privilege.”²² Elsewhere, he refers to “a typically Jewish attitude” and “the overconfidence in their election on the part of many of his fellow Jews.”²³ Dunn even draws direct links with Pharisees in particular:

[S]uch self-confidence had been typical of Paul himself in his days as a Pharisee before Christ, apparently oblivious of his own need of a fundamental repentance. In fact we would probably not be far from the mark if we were to conclude that Paul's

19. See Schreiner (“Justification,” 140–41 n.29) for a lengthy and helpful list of commentators who espouse the view that “Paul addresses Gentiles in Rom 1:18–32 and Jews in 2:1–16.” Schreiner attributes this view, in 1993, to “most commentaries”; his own argument appears on p. 141. However, Thorsteinsson (*Interlocutor*, 177–96) conclusively demonstrates that Paul's rhetoric in Rom 2:1ff. is so closely linked to 1:18–32 that a change in subject (or addressee) in Rom 2:1 is unlikely.

20. The second-person singular addresses begin in Rom 2:1: “Therefore, *you are* without excuse, all of you who judge . . .”

21. Dunn, *Romans*, 1:76–77.

22. *Ibid.*, 1:88.

23. *Ibid.*, 1:90, 91; respectively. Similarly, Cranfield comments on v. 1: “That the truth thus stated applies to the heathen moralist, to the civil magistrate, to the ministers of the Church, is indeed true; but Paul himself, it is scarcely to be doubted, was thinking *especially of the typical Jew*” (Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:142; my emphasis).

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interlocutor is Paul himself—*Paul the unconverted Pharisee*, expressing attitudes Paul remembered so well as having been his own!²⁴

Dunn is hardly unique in this interpretation. Thomas Schreiner offers a similar point, though he offers little by way of argumentation.²⁵ Twice Cranfield affirms that Paul is “apostrophizing the typical Jew” in Rom 2:17–24,²⁶ and between these two referents he generalizes to Paul’s rhetoric earlier in Romans 2: “An attitude of moral superiority toward the Gentiles was so characteristic of the Jews . . . that, in the absence of any indication to the contrary, it is natural to assume that Paul is apostrophizing the typical Jew in 2:1ff.”²⁷ My own reading of Paul and of Romans hopes to demonstrate this interpretation’s fatal flaws.

Contrary to Cranfield’s implication that there is no “indication to the contrary,” there are reasons to think Paul still has a gentile in view when he turns from the base immorality of Romans 1 to the judgmental interlocutor of Romans 2.²⁸ The intrusion of a new chapter here may mask the flow from the end of Romans 1 into the beginning of Romans 2.²⁹ If we do not

24. Dunn, *Romans*, 1:91; my emphasis.

25. Note the weight Schreiner puts on the terms “most likely” and “would”: “Rom 2:1–5 *most likely* refers to the Jews because it is the Jews who *would* consider themselves morally superior due to possession of the law. They, as God’s elect people, *would* reckon that God’s kindness to them *would* make punishment unlikely (2:4)” (Schreiner, “Justification,” 141; my emphases). Apparently, Schreiner supposes that gentiles did not consider themselves “morally superior.” However, Roman expressions of their “moral superiority” *vis-à-vis* other nations were ubiquitous, were communicated by means of a broad range of communicative media, and invited the interactive participation of subjects of the Empire: “Imperial theology promoted the claims that *the gods, especially Jupiter, had chosen Rome and its emperor to rule the world and manifest the gods’ will and blessings among the nations*. These messages were asserted through civic celebrations of victories and rulers, as well as by image-bearing coins, statues, buildings, imperial personnel, festivals, poets, writers, and so forth. The imperial cult, frequently promoted by local elites, provided a way of understanding the world and Roman presence as reflecting the will and pleasure of the gods. It offered residents of a city like Ephesus a mostly voluntary means of marking their participation in that world by expressing loyalty and gratitude through sacrifices to images in temples, and at games, street parties, artisan guild meals, and so on” (Carter, *John and Empire*, 57; my emphasis).

26. Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:137, 139.

27. *Ibid.*, 1:138.

28. My discussion of the rhetorical flow from Romans 1 into Romans 2 is heavily dependent on Thorsteinsson’s discussion of “Paul’s gentile interlocutor in Romans 2:1–5” (*Interlocutor*, 177–96). In order to avoid the multiplication of footnotes, I have provided references only to verbatim quotations from *Paul’s Interlocutor*.

29. For this reason, I have intentionally ignored the chapter division and focused on

let the new chapter prejudice us into assuming that Paul shifts subject, the continuity between these two chapters becomes immediately evident:

1:28 And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God handed them over to an unfit mind, to do things that are not fitting, ²⁹ because they are filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, and malice, full of envy, murder, strife, treachery, malevolence. They are gossipers, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boasters, contrivers of evil deeds, disobedient to their parents, ³¹ senseless, faithless, heartless, merciless. ³² Even though they knew the just requirement of God—that those who practice such things are worthy of death—they not only do such things but also approve of those who practice them! ^{2:1} *Therefore* [*dio*], you are without excuse, all of you who judge, for you condemn yourself by that for which you judge another because you who judge do the very same things. (Rom 1:28—2:1; my emphasis)

The most telling indicator that Paul continues to address a gentile must be the very first word of v. 1: *dio*. Thorsteinsson offers the following as three of the more popular understandings of *dio*:

1. a “colorless transition particle” that does not connect what follows (Rom 2:1–16) with what precedes;
2. a link between what follows with the immediately preceding sentence (1:32); or
3. a link between what follows with the entire preceding pericope (1:18–32).

Thorsteinsson rightly rejects the first interpretation: “A survey of Paul’s usage of *dio* shows that there are no instances of it being used as a ‘colorless transition particle.’ Though the referential scope may vary, *dio* always marks a conclusion drawn from the preceding.”³⁰ He likewise rejects the second proposal in light of the contrast between Rom 1:32 and 2:1. Paul describes the target of his polemic in 1:31 as those who “approve of those who practice [such things]”; in 2:1, he portrays his interlocutor as “you who judge” (= condemn) those he described at the end of Romans 1.

That leaves the third option, that *dio* links Rom 2:1–16 with 1:18–32 as a whole and “provides the cause for the interlocutor in 2:1

Rom 1:18—2:16 in this chapter.

30. Thorsteinsson, *Interlocutor*, 178.

being ‘without excuse’ when he judges others.”³¹ Most contemporary commentators advocate this understanding of the conjunction, *dio*, but this agreement has not led to any consensus regarding Paul’s intention in 2:1–16 and the identity of the interlocutor he imagines. Thorsteinsson attributes the source of the problem to a non-linear, “retrogressive” reading of Romans 2:

It seems to me that the different conclusions reached in this respect depend largely upon the way in which scholars approach the text as text, i.e., whether they prefer to read it (more) linearly and progressively (in this case, from 1:18 onwards) or (more) reversely or retrogressively (from 2:17 backwards). . . . Would Paul, then, have intended his audience to read the letter repeatedly in order to perceive fully the reverse reference assumed by Cranfield and others? Hardly.³²

In light of these arguments—(i) the typical interpretation of *dio* and (ii) the preference for a linear reading of the text—the identity of Paul’s interlocutor in Rom 2:1–16 can only be a gentile who participates in the revelation of God’s wrath, just like the gentiles described in 1:18–32. The only hindrance to this clear and necessary reading of the text is, unfortunately, the text’s history of interpretation.³³

Romans 2:1ff. is the first instance of Paul’s use of diatribe.³⁴ Stanley Stowers’s doctoral thesis offered the seminal study of diatribe, which had not advanced noticeably since the doctoral work of Rudolf Bultmann.³⁵ Stowers demonstrates that the “dialogical style” of the diatribe “[grew] out of the situation of the philosophical school”³⁶ and is a pedagogical tool with which a teacher instructs a student rather than a polemical tool with which a disputant debates an opponent.³⁷

31. Ibid., 179.

32. Ibid., 180, 181.

33. Thorsteinsson also identifies “certain presuppositions about Jews in antiquity” as a culprit in the misreading of Paul’s interlocutor at 2:1ff. (see *ibid.*, 183–88).

34. For a contemporary use of diatribe in imitation of Paul’s style, which helpfully illustrates not simply its style but also its tenor and purpose, see Keesmaat, “Reading,” 47–64.

35. See Bultmann, *Stil der Paulinischen Predigt*.

36. Stowers, *Diatribe*, 76.

37. Similarly, see Campbell, “Separation,” 461. Pace Garroway (*Gentile-Jews*, 75), who refers to Romans’ “obviously polemical character” and argues that Paul “is responding to actual accusations made against him.”

The diatribe is not the technical instruction in logic, physics, etc., but *discourses and discussions in the school where the teacher employed the “Socratic” method of censure and protreptic*. The goal of this part of the instruction was not simply to impart knowledge, but to transform the students, to point out error and to cure it. Our review of the sources suggests that the dialogical element of the diatribe was an important part of this pedagogical approach. The two major categories of dialogical features are address to the interlocutor and objections from the interlocutor.³⁸

At this point in Romans, Paul’s interaction with the interlocutor conforms to Stowers’s first category of dialogical features (“address to the interlocutor”). In Romans 3–11, Paul will both address the interlocutor and field objections and/or questions from him.³⁹ As we work through Paul’s use of diatribe throughout Romans,⁴⁰ we will need to remember the function of diatribe in Hellenistic rhetoric: instruction, not disputation.

Paul leaves behind his stark description of gentile depravity, which climaxed in 1:31, and conjures up an imagined dialogue partner, a gentile moralist who, like Paul, disapproves of those who lose control of their emotions or desires and succumb to the power of their passions (*ta pathē*;

38. Stowers, *Diatribe*, 76–77; original italics. Stowers emphasizes the pedagogical aspect of diatribe: “Our study has suggested very strongly that the dialogical element in the diatribe is basically an attempt to adapt this method to a dogmatic type of philosophy in the school situation. Thus, *censure is not an aspect of real inquiry, but an attempt to expose specific errors in thought and behavior so that the student can be led to another doctrine of life*. . . . [Our sources] use *diatribē* as a term for the school as we would speak of ‘going to school.’ They also use the term to designate various forms of education activity in the school (lecture, discussions)” (ibid., 77; my emphasis). Similarly, Changwon Song refers to “the so-called ‘Pauline schoolroom’” (Song, *Reading*, 82).

39. I use masculine pronouns to refer to Paul’s interlocutor in light of the likelihood that Paul imagines a male student dialogue partner. As we will see later in Romans 2, circumcision looms large in the discussion, and this would not have been such an issue had Paul imagined himself addressing a female interlocutor. However, as we will see in Romans 16, Paul is in no way unaware of high-status, influential, even educated women, and I am open to the possibility that Phoebe herself was the original reader—or *lector*—of Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians.

40. Changwon Song rightly notes that the diatribe begins in Romans 2 and continues through Romans 14 (*Reading*, 22). As a result, “the ‘body’ of Romans as a whole, not partially, may well be considered a pure diatribe that was performed in the so-called ‘Pauline schoolroom’” (see ibid., 55–82; p. 82 quoted). Song goes on to prefer, solely on this basis, “a short version of Romans . . . as a reasonable option in choosing which text to use when reading Romans.” However, as we will see in our discussion of Romans 15, the rhetorical format of the diatribe continues into Romans 15, and Paul continues to speak in the manner of a letter-writer even after he finishes speaking in the manner of a rhetorical instructor (see Rom 15:15–16:27).

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see Rom 1:26).⁴¹ “Therefore, you are without excuse, all of you who judge, for you condemn yourself by that for which you judge another because you who judge do the very same things” (Rom 2:1). Matera helpfully discusses the close links between Rom 1:18–32 and 2:1–16, despite the change in tone and rhetorical style:

In this first address to his imaginary interlocutor (2:1–2) . . . Paul draws a close relation between those whom he has indicted in 1:18–32 and the arrogant interlocutor who judges them. That interlocutor may think that he is morally superior but, in the light of the gospel that Paul preaches, Paul knows that such a person is the same as those whom he judges.⁴²

Witherington rightly notes that Paul is not necessarily “accusing the ‘you’ addressed here of committing all the same sort of moral sins listed in 1:18–32, or of idolatry. Paul is accusing such a person of judgmentalism and some hypocrisy, and thus of carrying forward a pagan life into Christian existence to some degree.”⁴³ However, nothing in Rom 2:1–16 suggests that Paul has shifted from idolatrous gentiles in Romans 1 to gentiles who have entered “Christian existence.”⁴⁴ In fact, the arrogance Paul critiques in 2:1–16 becomes problematic not simply for being arrogance but also for its failure to set God apart from all of creation and worship him alone.⁴⁵

In his *Epistles to Lucilius*, Seneca offers the kind of gentile moralism against which Paul writes.⁴⁶ Paul’s point in v. 1 is not that those who

41. Historians often refer to “ethical monotheism,” the idea that pagans could pursue a righteous and moral lifestyle and worship a single (or supreme) deity without necessarily subscribing the *Jewish* monotheism (e.g., Bird, *Crossing*, passim). Pagans could and often did exhibit considerable interest in virtue, piety, justice, and so on. See the discussion of the Greco-Roman value of self-mastery, especially in my discussion of Romans 6 and 7, below.

42. Matera, *Romans*, 61.

43. Witherington and Hyatt, *Romans*, 79.

44. As Witherington himself notes (see Witherington and Hyatt, *Romans*, 81)!

45. Similarly Thorsteinsson: “Hence, unless simply swept over, the inferential conjunction *dio* indicates that the judging individual addressed in 2:1 is ‘without excuse’ (*anapologētos*) precisely because he is one of the people described previously in 1:18–32, viz. gentiles, the very people who are ‘without excuse’ (*anapologētoi*, 1:20) *because they failed to acknowledge and worship God properly*” (*Interlocutor*, 182; my emphasis).

46. For example, in his letter, *On Practising What You Preach* (written ca. 63–65 CE), Seneca admonishes Lucilius: “[P]hilosophy teaches us to act, not to speak; it exacts of every man that he should live according to this own standards, that his life should not be out of harmony with his words, and that, further, his inner life should be of one hue and not out of harmony with all his activities. This, I say, is the highest duty and

judge immoral people are themselves immoral (though popular Christianity often reads Rom 2:1 in precisely this way⁴⁷). Paul's point is that the moralizing gentile who condemns the immoral, unphilosophical pagan also "knew God [but] did not glorify him as God or give thanks" (1:21), also "claimed to be wise [but was] made foolish" (1:22), also "exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image" (1:23). In other words, even gentiles who do not indulge in debased sexual immorality (see 1:26–27) but who nevertheless refuse to honor the one Creator God give their worship to things that are not really gods. Garroway rightly describes the judgmental gentile's problem in terms of failure to acknowledge God, so that "by consequence [he] became foolish, senseless, idolatrous, debased, and wicked."⁴⁸ They have all "exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and they worshipped and gave priestly service to the creation rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen" (1:25). The problem, for Paul, is that gentiles worship created gods rather than the Creator God. The debased and debauched immorality of some gentiles is simply the by-product of their misdirected worship.

In vv. 2–6, Paul distinguishes himself, a Jewish writer, from his imagined gentile interlocutor: "Now *we* know that the judgment of God is according to truth against all those who do such things." (Whether Paul distinguishes himself, as a Jew, from his rhetorical audience [the interlocutor] or his actual audience [gentile Christians in Rome] is unclear, though I prefer the former.) God judges everyone who refuses to acknowledge him as Creator, regardless of their moral status. The moral gentile who imagines he will fare any better than morally debauched gentiles who worship idols deceives himself. Ironically, by imagining that he does not need God's offer of mercy and forgiveness, the elitist moral gentile misses the gospel's offer of repentance, which the God of Israel, the Creator God,

the highest proof of wisdom,—that deed and word should be in accord, that a man should be equal to himself under all conditions, and always the same" (Seneca, *Lucil.*, 20:2 [Gummere, LCL]). Other commentators similarly appeal to Seneca in order to understand either the kind of letter Paul imagined himself writing or the kind of person he or his audience might have imagined as they read that letter (see Witherington and Hyatt, *Romans*, 79; Stowers, *Rereading*, 124; *inter alios*).

47. For example, in an essay linked to Romans 2 on bible.org, Bob Deffinbaugh claims, "Those who enthusiastically condemned the Gentile 'heathen' as sinners, on the basis of Paul's argument in 1:18–32, were self-condemned. They practiced the very same things which they condemned in others (2:1, 2, 3). . . . Did the Jews really sin in the same way as the Gentiles? Were the Jews guilty of immorality, sexual impurity and perversion, idolatry, robbery, and even murder? The answer is a clear and undeniable, 'Yes!'" (Deffinbaugh, "Coming Wrath of God").

48. Garroway, *Gentile-Jews*, 90.

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extends to everyone (even the depraved humanity described in 1:18–32!). Despite their common judgment against idol-worship and its immoral consequences, the elitism of gentile moral philosophy runs counter to the God of Paul's gospel.⁴⁹ This elitism leads moral gentiles to “despise the riches of his kindness, his forbearance, and his patience” (2:4).⁵⁰ Instead of espousing the virtues of self-mastery and self-control,⁵¹ Paul tells the moral gentile to allow the kindness of the jilted Creator God to lead him into repentance. If he does not, he is storing up for himself the wrath of God, the very wrath the gentile moralist seeks to avert by means of moral effort.

Paul's citation of Ps 61:12 (LXX) and Prov 24:12 comes out of the blue and appears, at first blush, to reinforce rather than rebut the gentile moralist's point of view, that God “will repay each person according to their deeds.” At the very least, we have to admit that Paul takes an interest in one's works and anticipates that the judgment of God will take account of these works. Later in the letter we will even see Paul construe one's behavior in terms of slavery, whether to sin or to righteousness (Romans 6), and he will admonish his readers to “walk according to the Spirit” (Romans 8) and even provide some glimpse of what that walk should look like (Romans 12–15). However, at this point in the letter, in light of Paul's

49. I assume the answer to Paul's question in 2:3 is “yes” (i.e. the gentile moralist does actually expect to escape God's/the gods' judgment), primarily because this moralist, who agrees with Paul's indictment against the undisciplined immorality of the masses, has not born the signs of God's wrath described in 1:18–32. Robert Jewett aptly describes Paul's rhetorical texture here: “Paul's formulation indicates that ‘the objector doubtless did suppose this, and not without reason, for the visible handing over to reprobate mind and behavior (i. 24, 26, 38), which was the token of God's wrath upon Gentile sinners, did not apply to him.’ Thus the rhetorical question is meant to be answered by the imaginary conversation partner in the affirmative” (Jewett, *Romans*, 200, citing Barrett, *Romans*, 44). A little further on Jewett rightly says, “each group is obligated to accept others as equally beloved by God” (Jewett, *Romans*, 203); this gets to the heart of Paul's critique of the gentile moralist and his elitist condemnation of others.

50. “To despise God was for the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds an unspeakable offense” (Jewett, *Romans*, 201).

51. For example, notice the self-reliant tenor of Seneca's instructions to Lucilius in his letter, *On Siren Songs*: “Work is the sustenance of noble minds. There is, then, no reason why, in accordance with that old vow of your parents, you should pick and choose what fortune you wish should fall to your lot, or what you should pray for; besides, it is base for a man who has already travelled the whole round of highest honours to be still importuning the gods. What need is there of vows? *Make yourself happy through your own efforts*; you can do this, if once you comprehend that whatever is blended with virtue is good, and that whatever is joined to vice is bad” (Seneca, *Lucil.* 31:5 [Gummere, LCL]; my emphasis).

harangue against idol-worship in Rom 1:18–32 and against gentile moralism in 2:1ff., “the deeds” [*ta erga*] he has in mind in 2:6 must be the worship of the one true God. In context, both Psalm 61 LXX and Proverbs 24 refer to God vindicating the one who persists and perseveres in faithfulness to God and refuses to go with others into unrighteousness. In light of the context of these passages, God does not judge people primarily on the basis of whether they have been self-controlled, compassionate, pious, and so on. He judges people on the basis of whether they have set him apart, as God, from those things that are not-God. The psalm and the proverb both demonstrate the same assumption, which Paul shares: for those who have set the Creator God apart from his creation, the other virtues will follow as a result.

Paul switches from using second-person singular addresses (= you) to third-person plural addresses in vv. 7–10. All of Rom 2:6–16, however, “continually points back to v. 5, in which Paul exposed the interlocutor’s wretched position on the day of judgment,” and so Paul’s focus remains on his imagined interlocutor throughout.⁵² As such, Rom 2:7–10 extends the second-person singular critique of 2:1–6 to everyone who fails to worship God. Moreover, Paul picks up the word *ergon* (“deed”) from his quotation in v. 6, but he uses the singular, *deed*, rather than the more typical plural, *erga* (“deeds”).⁵³ Paul’s use of the singular term, *ergou agathou* (“good deed”) in v. 7 is unusual. Paul also uses the singular terms *kakon* (“evil deed”) and *agathon* (“good deed”) in vv. 9 and 10, respectively, in exactly the same ways. The question is: what “deed”—whether an “evil deed” or a “good deed”—does Paul have in mind?

I will argue shortly that the difference between *erga* (“deeds”) and *ergon* (“deed”) is negligible; these have the same referent. However, some commentators who have come to the same conclusion nevertheless misconstrue Paul’s point by conforming the singular term to the plural (rather than the plural to the singular). Moo, for example, suggests, “Paul goes out of his way to stress that the work that God so rewards is a persistent lifestyle of godliness.”⁵⁴ We saw in Romans 1 that Paul’s critique centered

52. Thorsteinsson, *Interlocutor*, 159.

53. In Romans alone, Paul uses *ergon* fifteen times. Of these, ten are plural; he uses the singular at Rom 2:7, 15; 13:3; 14:20; and 15:18.

54. Moo, *Romans*, 137; see also Dunn, *Romans*, 1:85–86. Schreiner (*Romans*, 113) inexplicably paraphrases the singular *ergou agathou* as plural (“Verses 7–10 clarify that the repayment for good works [*sic!*] is either eternal life or eschatological wrath”). Elsewhere he translates v. 7 more ambiguously: “V. 7 describes such people as ‘seeking glory and honor and immortality by patient endurance in good work’” (Schreiner, “Justification,” 142). He then immediately slips right back into paraphrasing v. 7 with

on the fundamental error of worshiping graven images rather than the Creator God of Israel. “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and they worshipped and gave priestly service to the creation rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen” (Rom 1:25). This is “the evil deed” that leads to the judgment of God against those who worship other gods. In contrast to this evil deed, “the good deed” in 2:7–10 must refer to recognizing and acknowledging the Creator God of Israel as the true God. God grants eternal life to those who steadfastly seek after him and refuse to turn away from him to worship anyone (or anything) else. To those who turn aside from God, who are “disobedient to the truth and even persuaded by unrighteousness” (2:8), God will repay their evil deed with “wrath and anger” [*orgē kai thymos*].⁵⁵

Therefore, we can agree with Jewett that “the use of the plural ‘works’ in v. 6 and the singular ‘good’ in v. 10 appear to reflect roughly interchangeable meaning.”⁵⁶ Paul demonstrates a consistency across Rom 1:18–2:10 that “the deed(s)” God expects from gentiles (and for the lack of which God reveals his wrath against them) is to worship him as Creator. The offer of eternal life, on the one hand, or wrath and anger on the other applies to everyone, “the Jew first as well as the Greek” (vv. 9–10). These verses do not *redefine* Jewish election so much as they *clarify* the point that one’s response to the Creator God—rather than one’s national identity—determines one’s eschatological fate.⁵⁷ Both Jews and gentiles would come under God’s judgment. YHWH reserves eternal life for those who worship him as God (first for the Jew as well as for the Greek), and he guarantees

a plural reading *ergou agathou*: “And it should be noted that Paul does not focus only on the negative, but he also brings in the positive: *those who do good works* will receive an eschatological reward, namely, eternal life” (ibid., 143; original italics; my emphasis in bold).

55. Paul’s references to God’s wrath [*orgē*] in 2:5 (2x) and 2:8 harkens back to his declaration of the revelation of God’s wrath in 1:18. Moreover, this entire section (2:1–16) is closely linked with Paul’s rhetoric in Romans 1 by the double reference to “the Jew first as well as the Greek” (2:9, 10; cp. 1:16).

56. Jewett, *Romans*, 204.

57. This is an important point. Christian readings of Paul often denigrate Jewish ideas of election as if Jews thought that just being “a Jew” resulted in a certain relationship with God. Jews knew full well that some descendants of Abraham refused to acknowledge God as God (e.g., any of Judah’s and/or Israel’s miserable kings). But given God’s special relationship with Abraham and his descendants, being “a Jew” certainly provided additional opportunity to know the true God, opportunity that gentiles did not normally or naturally have.

wrath and indignation for those who worship anything/one else (first the Jew as well as the Greek).

Paul continues to use third-person plural rhetoric through the remainder of 2:11–16. Paul explains why worship of the true God and not ethnic or national identity played such a definitive role for one's eschatological fate. In one sentence: "For there is no favoritism with God" (2:11). Paul argues against an implicit claim that God favors one particular people or nation over others. We all know that Jews thought of themselves as God's chosen people.⁵⁸ We need to be careful, however, to avoid seeing Jewish ethnocentrism here, as if Jews were the only people who imagined themselves as especially favored by God (or the gods).⁵⁹ Romans, Greeks, and just about every other people group (including Americans!) fancy themselves the peculiar objects of God's (or the gods') affections.

The Romans certainly saw their political, economic, and military supremacy throughout the Mediterranean region as a sign that the gods had appointed Rome for greatness. Early in Rome's founding *mythos*, Virgil's epic poem *Aeneid*, Jupiter announces his intentions for the Roman people to Aeneas' mother: "For these [the Romans] I set neither bounds nor periods. Dominion without end (*imperium sine fine*) I give to them" (Virgil, *Aen.* 1:278–79).⁶⁰ Texts like these lead Warren Carter to extract three principal themes from Roman imperial ideology of the first century CE:

58. The idea of Jewish election is ubiquitous. But for one particularly striking expression, see the expansive retelling of Genesis 1 in the pseudepigraphal book, *Jubilees*. According to this Second-Temple-era text, God set Israel apart from the very beginning of creation: "And he gave us a great sign, the sabbath day, so that we might work six days and observe a sabbath from all work on the seventh day. And he told us—all of the angels of the presence and all of the angels of sanctification, these two great kinds—that we might keep the sabbath with him in heaven and on earth. And he said to us, 'Behold I shall separate for myself a people from among all the nations. And they will also keep the sabbath. And I will sanctify them for myself, and I will bless them. Just as I have sanctified and shall sanctify the sabbath day for myself thus shall I bless them. And they will be my people and I will be their God. And I have chosen the seed of Jacob from among all that I have seen. And I have recorded him as my firstborn son, and have sanctified him for myself forever and ever. And I will make known to them the sabbath day so that they might observe therein a sabbath from all work'" (*Jub.* 2:17–20; my emphases).

59. James Dunn (*Romans*) bases his entire reconstruction of Paul's perspective on Torah, Israel, and Judaism on the idea that Paul critiques Jewish ethnocentrism. That idea is partly correct, but Dunn does not take sufficient account (i) of the fact that other nations—even every other nation!—viewed themselves as unique, elect, chosen, and (ii) of the likelihood that Paul's Jewish contemporaries did not assume that national identity *apart from Torah-observance* sufficed to merit God's favor. See Das, *Paul*.

60. Collins, "Eschatologies of Late Antiquity," 331.

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- The gods have chosen Rome.
- Rome and its emperor are agents of the gods' rule, will, and presence among human beings.
- Rome manifests the gods' blessings—security, peace, justice, faithfulness, fertility—among those that submit to Rome's rule.⁶¹

Against ideas of Roman election such as these, Paul writes that there is no favoritism with God, and so elite (and elitist) Romans will have no basis for confidence on the day of God's judgment.

Paul continues to explain that both egregious sinners and those who transgress the Law, even as they attempt to observe it, find themselves subject to God's judgment (Rom 2:12).⁶² I have struggled with Paul's apparent argument in 2:13–15 that the gentiles, who do not have the Torah, do “the things of Torah” [*ta tou nomou*] and so demonstrate that Torah has been inscribed on their hearts. Torah, of course, includes commandments such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, dietary restrictions, and other distinctive markers of Jewish identity, and these are precisely the things that gentiles do *not* do.⁶³ So what does Paul imagine himself talking about when he refers to gentiles doing “the things of Torah,” even though they do not (apparently) do all of the things of Torah?⁶⁴

61. Carter, *Roman Empire*, 83. Carter goes on to explain, “[These claims] expressed their understanding that Rome's dominating place in the world was the will of the gods. These ideas justified efforts to force people into submission to Rome.”

62. Remember that elite Greco-Roman moralists were as susceptible to the charge of self-righteousness and hypocrisy as were Jewish moral rigorists (see the discussion above). When we account for Roman (rather than Jewish) ideas of election, Stanley Stowers' translation of Rom 2:11–12 makes good sense: “God shows no partiality. For all who have sinned in a lawless manner, shall perish in a manner befitting lawlessness. All who have sinned while living within the law, shall have their case judged by the law” (*Rereading*, 139). In Rom 2:14–15 Paul refers to gentiles “who do not have the *nomon*” but who nevertheless “do the things of the *nomou*,” who “are a *nomos* unto themselves” and who “demonstrate the work of the *nomou* inscribed on their hearts.” In these verses *nomos* clearly refers to the Torah of Moses. Therefore, I find it likely that already in vv. 12–13 *nomos* likely refers to the Mosaic covenant.

63. There were, of course, gentiles who practiced circumcision, and every culture differentiates what can be eaten from what cannot. My claim, “these are precisely the things that gentiles do *not* do,” capitalizes on the *distinctive* role these practices played in the differentiation, construction, and maintenance of a peculiarly *Jewish* identity.

64. We can draw a helpful analogy with the illegal immigration debate in contemporary American politics. Politicians have struggled with the concept of law-abiding illegal immigrants. After all, such people regularly break the law simply by means of living this side of the American borders; in addition, there are myriad employment, tax, and other civil laws that such people cannot help but violate. Nevertheless, there

We have already seen the answer: the “good deed” or “righteous act” *par excellence* is the recognition and acknowledgement of YHWH as Creator God.⁶⁵ Simon Gathercole rightly argues that the sense of *ta tou nomou poiōsin* (“they do the things of Torah”) in Rom 2:14 “is neither ‘vague’ nor ‘partial,’ nor utterly perfect.”⁶⁶ However, his own explanation, that “the reference is to the fundamental knowledge of God and orientation to his will that is lacking in the Jewish contemporaries of these Gentiles” is hardly more explanative or precise than the “vague” and “partial” explanations he rejects.⁶⁷ The question remains, *how* can Paul envisage uncircumcised gentiles who work on Sabbath and do not observe *kashrut* as “doing the things of Torah,” or, in Gathercole’s words, demonstrating “the fundamental knowledge of God and orientation to his will”?

Gathercole’s reading imports a contrast between gentiles and Jews, the former who do the things of Torah and the latter who do not. However, Paul’s rhetoric operates with a contrast between gentiles and other gentiles: on the one hand, certain gentiles do the things of Torah, while other gentiles exhibit the depravity and debauchery Paul described in Rom 1:18–32.⁶⁸ When Paul refers to “the work of Torah” [*to ergon tou no-*

is clearly a difference between illegal immigrants who try to take care of their family without doing any harm to others and those who steal, murder, or commit other violent offenses. The language of “law-abiding illegal immigrants” is meant to account for just this sort of difference. I think Paul’s language of gentiles who do “the things of Torah” functions similarly.

65. Curiously, despite his masterful rereading of three perennially difficult sections of Romans, Garroway (*Gentile-Jews*, 95) preserves a more traditional explanation that lacks any basis in the text of Romans itself: “In 2:17–29, Paul reconfigures Jewish identity so that its *sine qua non* is no longer the literal circumcision of the penis, or performance of the literal decrees of the Law, but a spirit-mediated circumcision and the consequent performance of the righteous decrees of the Law, *which are presumably its moral, rather than ceremonial, requirements*” (my emphasis; see also p. 107). My own explanation (*viz.* that Paul reduces Torah [*nomos*] to the recognition and worship of God, as Creator, distinct from all of creation) derives from Paul’s rhetoric in Romans 1 and his development of that rhetoric in Romans 2.

66. Gathercole, “Law unto Themselves,” 35.

67. Similarly, Das (with whose reading of Romans I am largely sympathetic) claims, “Romans 2 critiques Jewish confidence on the basis of mere possession of the Law. Paul seeks to disturb that comfort by reminding the hypothetical Jew that he or she must also obey that Law” (*Paul*, 9; original emphasis). But can we really suppose that Paul thought any of his Jewish contemporaries would have forgotten the expectation that they not only possess but also obey Torah?

68. Surprisingly, Gathercole himself notes this contrast (“Law unto Themselves,” 43). However, his reading of an ethnically Jewish interlocutor in Rom 2:17ff. and the striking parallels between vv. 14–15 and 25–29 wrongly lead him to import a gentile/Jew

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mou] in v. 15 that some gentiles, apparently, have inscribed on their heart, the work he has in mind is the worship of the Creator God.⁶⁹ Despite not circumcising their sons, abstaining from work on the Sabbath, and so on, Paul portrays gentiles who nevertheless distinguish the Creator God from the created world and only worship the former as those who demonstrate “the work of Torah written on their hearts.”

Before we move on to consider Paul’s dialogue with an interlocutor who “calls himself a Jew” (2.17ff.), let me summarize our discussion of 2:1–16 in two points:

- First, Paul turns from the base depravity he described in 1:18–32 and critiques a gentile moralist in 2:1–16 who would have been nodding his head approvingly at Paul’s harangue against the passionate, unnatural, undisciplined lifestyle of the masses. Despite appearing to be on his side, Paul turns on this gentile moralist (“all of you who judge”) because he, too, has forsaken the worship of the Creator God.
- Second, in 2:1–16 Paul reduces Torah to worshipping the Creator God rather than the hand-made gods of the gentiles. Each person—the Jew first as well as the Greek—will stand before the Creator God and be judged on how they responded to “the knowledge of God [that] is evident” to all peoples (see 1:19). This is how Paul can speak of gentiles—people who did not circumcise their sons on the eighth day, observe the Sabbath, or keep the distinctive Jewish dietary regiment—as those “who by nature do not have Torah” and yet who “do the things of Torah” (2:14).⁷⁰

contrast rather than to recognize the gentile/gentile contrast operative in Romans 1–2.

69. A few paragraphs later, Gathercole will refer to “[t]hose who do not belong to the nation that received the Torah” but who “nevertheless obey *its ultimate requirements*” (ibid., 37; my emphasis). In light of Paul’s anti-idolatry polemic in Romans 1, I would interpret Torah’s “ultimate requirements” as the necessity to distinguish the Creator God from the created cosmos.

70. Gathercole rightly argues that *physei* (“by nature”) modifies the participle *ta echonta* (“who have”) rather than the subjunctive *poiōsin* (“they do”; see Gathercole, “Law unto Themselves,” 35–37).